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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an analysis of urban youth gangs and intervention and prevention strategies for schools, and describes an example of a Cleveland (Ohio) school-wide response. After reviewing the scope of the problem and recent attention to gangs and youth violence, the paper looks at why youth join gangs and lists 12 conditions. Another section explains gang growth and development based on the author's 7 years of experience in working with gangs in schools. An exploration of school impact and responses argues the importance of recognition, acknowledgement, and definition. Policy and administrative responses must develop local and specific definitions of gang activity, prompt institutional action and attention, and leadership and cooperation among school and local authorities. School intervention and prevention strategies require strong organizational commitment from both school boards and school administrators, unmistakable policies forbidding weapons on school property and enforcing school safety, staff and parent training, and establishment of cooperative ongoing relationships with police and social agencies serving students. The Cleveland (Ohio) Public Schools' gang intervention and prevention program and its Youth Gang Unit has seen a 26 percent reduction in gang related incidents during the first 8 weeks of Year 2 of the project. (Contains 10 references.) (JB)

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Youth Gangs and Schools: The Need for Intervention and Prevention Strategies

by

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Introduction

Although the majority of youth within a typical school do not participate in gang-related activity, the incidents which do occur impact the entire school community. Unresolved conflict interferes with the educational process and deprives students and faculty of valuable time needed for learning. Recognizing the negative impact of gang activity, many districts are seeking intervention and prevention strategies which will ensure safe and secure schools.

The Problem

Increased attention to youth violence, especially organized gang activity, has led to heightened interest in containing, controlling and preventing gang activity. This attention has also generated increased academic research, professional conferences and coordinated information-sharing aimed at developing community responses to address this problem.

The violent activities of gangs have generated noticeable attention with extensive media coverage both nationally and locally. Los Angeles, with gang membership estimated at over 100,000 and hundreds of gang sets, has been the focal point of stories of rising numbers of gang homicides during the past five years. The problem is exacerbated by drug trafficking, an organized business for many large city gangs, feeding on the demand for drugs in America, especially crack cocaine. (National Institute of Justice, 1990).

With drug trafficking comes better armed and more violent gangs, as indicated by increases in drug-related homicides, "drive-by" shootings and other forms of open violence. Drug trafficking and the tendency of youth to settle disputes with the use of firearms, graphically illustrated by a 117 percent increase in the arrests of persons under 18 for murder since 1984, justify the concern over increased youth gang violence ("Youth and Guns", 1990).

Schools are clearly not immune from the impact of gang activity in the broader community. A 1989 Department of Justice survey of 10,000 youth, ages 12 to 19, found 14 percent of the white students, 20 percent of African-American students, and 32 percent of Hispanic students reporting the presence of gangs in their schools, with drug availability reported more often by those reporting gangs at their school (78%) than those where gangs were not present (66%). Students with gangs at school were twice as likely as those without gangs to fear attacks at, to, and from school (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992).

Why Do Kids Join Gangs?

Research prior to the 1980s focused largely on descriptive and sociological aspects of gang growth and development, providing a theoretical base but few practical policy implications for effectively addressing the gang problems in America's cities today (Hagedorn, 1988; Spergel, 1990). Gang formation is attributed to myriad social and economic factors, including but not limited to:

1. Breakdown of the family, decline of the nuclear family, dysfunctional families;
2. The need "to belong" combined with a tendency of youth to "group up;"
3. Low self-esteem;
4. Youth socialized in a non-work and/or criminal environment;
5. Poverty, especially in families with children, and in single-parent households;
6. Substandard living conditions;
7. Failure of public educational institutions;
8. Failure of the criminal justice systems, especially juvenile systems dealing with young offenders;
9. Teen unemployment;

10. Increased availability of alcohol, drugs and weapons for youth;
11. Economic incentives of crime;
12. Inability of social institutions to handle increased demands resulting from the above conditions.

While researchers and practitioners place different degrees of emphasis on the various factors, they generally agree that gangs are a symptom of broader social and economic problems rather than the problem itself.

Gang Growth and Development

Seven years of working with violent youthful offenders and gang members in a safety and security position for a large urban school district have led the writer to view the growth of gangs as a progressive development rather than an overnight phenomenon. While this may not be a profound observation to some, there are still many who perceive the gangs as starting sometime between the time they leave work on a Friday evening and when they return on Monday morning, forcing them to suddenly respond to a problem that developed seemingly overnight. To the contrary, gangs often start as informal social groups and progress in sophistication to active criminal gangs over an extended period of time.

Many gangs start as small groups of youth with common interests: neighborhoods, schools or social activities. The social factors most often attributed to gang formation--power, status, security, family, friendship, love--attract youth at impressionable ages, most noticeably around 12 or 13 years. As these groups grow in size, leadership develops informally and the group becomes offensive toward non-members through protection of turf, school rivalries and altercations which often ensue from "he said, she said, they said" rumors, problems over boyfriends or girlfriends, unsupervised parties, community festivals, sporting

events or similar circumstances. The groups change over a period of time from the original social and/or defensive groups to fighting gangs, fueled by the retaliatory nature of fighting today (i.e., the need to "one up" the opponents if the opponents win the first round, with situations escalating from one-on-one fights to gang fights involving multiple person attacks, the use of weapons, drive-by shootings, and other forms of serious violence).

Members of the gang often become involved in criminal offenses beginning with charges stemming from fighting (assaults, rioting, and weapons offenses) and later extending to criminal offenses initiated from economic motivation (auto theft and drug trafficking). It must be emphasized, however, that every youth associated with the original social group or even the fighting gang does not necessarily become involved in the economically-motivated criminal offenses. Many times these marginal members do, however, remain available as "back up" for the gang when a fight arises (Trump, 1992).

School Impact and Responses

While the days of "Friday Fight Day" have not completely disappeared, many gang-related altercations taking place at schools often start early Monday morning as a spill-over from altercations beginning in the community over the weekend. As previously noted, these conflicts often begin at parties, malls, community festivals, sporting events, and other activities where youth groups and gangs interact, often with minimal adult supervision or none. Unable to finish their altercations at the point of initial contact, the youth carry over the conflict to school where they know they will meet again at the beginning of the week. Typical offenses taking place at school, or to and from school, are likely to include assaults, threats, menacing, fights, possession and use of weapons, and trespassing for gang-related purposes (Cleveland Public Schools, 1992).

The major problem facing most cities and schools impacted by youth gangs is the problem of recognition, acknowledgement and definition. In a 1988 study on gangs in Ohio, Dr. C. Ronald Huff identified denial as a leading obstacle to effectively managing the youth gang problem. Huff noted that, "It is probable that official denial of gang problems actually facilitates victimization by gangs, especially in the public schools. School principals in several Ohio cities are reluctant to acknowledge 'gang-related' assaults for fear that such 'problems' may be interpreted as negative reflections of their management ability. This 'paralysis' may actually encourage gang-related assaults and may send the wrong signals to gang members, implying that they can operate with impunity within the vacuum created by this 'political paralysis'." One suburban school district developed an internal roster of "Unauthorized Social Groups" containing names of three major gangs, while top school official in a different city reported that his district had some instances of "organized youth student group conflict" but most definitely did not have gang problems.

Factors contributing to official denial include issues of definition, lack of ability to identify the problem, image, and lack of resources. Cities attempting to upgrade their image, particularly those with aggressive economic development efforts, simply do not want the negative publicity received from public admission of youth gang problems in their city. Those who privately acknowledge the existence of gangs recognize that public acknowledgement would lead to a demand for a response to the problem, thereby requiring the expenditure of human and financial resources not available under struggling economic conditions faced by most public agencies.

Spergel (1990) accurately details the problem of defining the term "gang", another major obstacle for cities and school systems. "Definitions in use have varied according to the perceptions and interests of the definer, academic fashions, and the changing reality of the gang. Definitions of the 1950s and 1960s were related to issues of etiology and were based on liberal, optimistic, social-reform assumptions. Definitions in the 1970s and 1980s are more descriptive, emphasize

violent and criminal characteristics, and may reflect more conservative social philosophies," he noted. Spergel further differentiates between delinquent groups and gangs, and points out that as definitions evoke "intense and emotional discussions", they can become the basis for "quite varied policies, laws, and strategies."

As the problems created by gangs persist, community members and the media begin to inquire what is being done by officials to address the problem. The officials, conceptualizing the gangs in comparison to large city gangs such as those in Los Angeles or Chicago, are quick to respond that they do not have gang problems such as those in the larger cities. Noting a lack of data on gang activity locally, they frequently dismiss the concerns as a perception problem based on media hype and community exaggeration.

As "trigger incidents" occur which can no longer be denied as gang-related, city and school officials are forced to respond to the problem. By this time, gang activity is often firmly entrenched in the community and the aura of a "real" crisis replaces that of a "perceived" crisis, leaving the officials to address both the immediate gang activity as well as the underlying social and economic problems.

Policy and Administrative Responses

School authorities must work with city officials to quickly overcome denial. A blanket definition is not practical due to the regional variations of gang structure and activity; therefore, local assessments must be made through collaborative efforts of school, police, social service, and significant others providing youth services in the broader community. A working definition and plan of action to address the problem and/or potential for a problem must be developed and implemented within a reasonable time, avoiding lag time where gang growth is allowed to progress. Members of the governing political bodies of the city and schools, as well as top administrators in those agencies and others servicing youth, must take leadership positions in this effort in order for its full potential to be reached.

In cases where problems of definition and denial are overcome, wide spread acceptance of reality can still be a slow process. Once fully accepted, public image and bureaucracy often take precedence over leadership behavior, resulting in waiting for someone to take the lead in formulating the actual policy. Even then, political and bureaucratic limitations in the formation of a comprehensive policy abound as single agency responses are often made incremental or from a crisis perspective.

Youth gang problems have long been viewed as local problems impacting only big cities. However, through a combination of local gang development and mobility of inner city gangs, suburban communities often feel the impact of what begins as big city gang problems (Moriarty & Fleming, 1990). Suburban schools and communities often respond more quickly and more thoroughly than big cities; however, the action taken is kept at a much lower profile and held within their respective communities or within a small group of allied cities in order to maintain a positive image. This response is acceptable providing the concern for action takes priority over issues of image.

School Intervention and Prevention Strategies

Schools must take a leadership role in addressing the youth gang issue. A strong organizational commitment from both school boards and school administrators is needed. Dr. C. Ronald Huff's recommendations (1988) include the need for school boards to develop unmistakable policies forbidding weapons on school property and to make clear the schools obligation to ensure an environment conducive to learning, free of intimidation and assaults.

School administrators must distinguish between youthful misbehavior and crimes. Assaults, weapons offenses, and many other gang-related activities are crimes and must be processed not only administratively within the school

disciplinary system but also criminally through the local police and criminal justice system. Failure by school administrators to report crimes is not only unethical but also constitutes a crime in itself in many jurisdictions.

As many districts look to create gang-specific policies, care must be given to assure that they are neither too broad or too specific, which would hinder responses to gangs rather than help. Many systems have adequate behavioral codes which address gang-related issues such as assaults, fighting, possession of weapons; however, student rights and responsibilities should be clearly communicated at the onset of each school year and regularly reinforced, with behavioral codes enforced in a firm, fair and consistent manner. The school district, as well as each school, should strongly communicate its anti-gang position with responses to gang incidents and related behavioral code violations receiving priority action.

Staff and parent training is an essential component in reducing gang activity. Administrators, teachers and support personnel should receive in-depth inservice training on gang motivations, organization, structure, identification and handling. Periodic updates should be provided to maintain staff awareness on the changing gang trends and activities. Similar training should be offered to parents with an emphasis on early identification of potential gang involvement, thereby permitting early intervention before the child becomes deeply involved with the gang.

Finally, schools must establish cooperative ongoing relationships with police and social agencies serving their students. Cooperation between schools and police provides mutual benefits, including two-way intelligence sharing to better equip each agency to be proactive in preventing gang activity in the schools and community. Cooperation between schools and social service agencies also provides benefits to both gang members and at-risk students by linking them with resources which may reduce factors contributing to gang involvement.

A Sample School Program

Recognizing the negative impact of gang activity on the Cleveland (Ohio) Public Schools, the district initiated efforts for gang intervention and prevention at the beginning of the 1991-92 school year with the creation of a Youth Gang Unit within its Division of Safety and Security. The Youth Gang Unit serves as a specialized resource team for maintaining regular interaction and coordination of services with a network of school officials and designated community organizations involved in addressing youth violence and gangs. The unit represents a balanced approach within the school district to direct efforts to containment, control, and prevention of youth gangs and networking of agencies working with gangs.

Youth Gang Unit goals include consistent and prioritized law enforcement, to reduce gang violence impacting the Cleveland Public Schools investigation and intervention of gang-related incidents; staff, parent and student anti-gang/drug education; and participation with community agencies in developing programs to reduce gang activity and create alternatives. The unit is comprised of five members of the Division of Safety and Security who work full-time throughout the district to prevent and respond to gang activities. During its first year of operation, the unit handled over 380 incidents and identified over 950 gang members while training over 7,400 staff, parents and students. Page 9, second paragraph, add the following at the end of the paragraph (using same CPS 1992 citation): The effectiveness of the program is illustrated by a 26 percent reduction in gang-related incidents during the first eight weeks of the 1992 school year as compared to the same time period in 1991. This reduction is atributed in part to enhanced prevention and early intervention strategies by the Youth Gang Unit, including countless daily counseling sessions, anti-gang presentations to students and intensified collagorative efforts with the Cleveland Police Youth/Gang Unit (Cleveland Public Schools, 1992).

Conclusion

Successful efforts to address youth gang problems must be geared toward the areas of containment and control, prevention and networking among the multiple agencies working together to address the issue. Law enforcement or educational programs alone will not succeed, particularly in communities with entrenched gang problems. Single program efforts must be replaced with dedicated personnel and multiple programs to monitor and respond to gang situations in the various agencies serving youth. The mobility of the gangs requires regular communication among agencies throughout the areas impacted by the gangs (Task Force on Violent Crime, 1990).

School systems are a critical part of a community effort to deal with youth gangs. Through early recognition and acknowledgement, and a balanced response within the school district and in the broader community as a whole, our schools can be returned to the traditional safe havens of the past.

This article represents the views of the author and does not necessarily reflect the official position or opinions of the Cleveland Public School District.

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